

My name is Cynthia. I am 60 years old and married, with an adult son and 4 grandchildren. I have been terrified of the dentist for as long as I can remember. I went 20 years ago and had some fillings with an injection in the arm. Six months ago, I screwed up my courage and went to Dentist B (for *brutal*), and he scraped my bottom front teeth. It really hurt, and he made them bleed. They carried on bleeding, and I was convinced that he had damaged my teeth.

I was never going to go back to him for the fillings that I needed—not if he were the last dentist on Earth. So after a few weeks of bullying myself to be brave, I went to see my son’s dentist, Dentist N (because my son said that he was nice). I managed to get as far as the doorway. I couldn’t . . . I just couldn’t go in. What would he do to me? Would he damage my teeth some more? Dentist N made no attempt to get me to sit in the chair. Although he was very nice, he had obviously concluded that I was not going to manage; perhaps he viewed me as a lost cause. He said that he would send me to a dentist who treated phobics and had extra training.

And so, I found myself sitting in the waiting room at the health center. I was terrified. I was shaking all over and on the point of tears. I was poised to run out the front door if necessary. I had my handkerchief with me. It was essential when I went to the dentist. I wrung it between my hands and tried to tear it apart. When I was doing that, I didn’t think about my mouth as much, and I could just about manage. Usually, I shredded it in a single appointment.

The dental nurse acknowledged me and said that the dentist would be with me soon. Then, the lady dentist (Dentist L) came out and sat down beside me to introduce herself. She started chatting, asking me about myself and my family. Although I calmed a little, my hands were still going, and I was shaking. She then told me about herself and how she worked. She said that she noticed how tense I was and that we should move somewhere else before other people came into the waiting room. We shifted to a quiet room, and Dentist L started to ask me about how I had managed to have dental treatment in the past and what scared me. I explained—particularly about Dentist B, as I was angry with him. It was so clear from what she asked and what she said that Dentist L really understood how awful it all was for me.

Dentist L explained that being tense made my mouth all tense, which made it more difficult for her to work and more uncomfortable for me. She asked me why I had the hanky. I explained that if I was pulling it apart, my anxiety was doing the shredding; therefore, I could manage to sit in the chair. She asked me if I would like to learn to relax a little bit in a way that might mean I could go without my hanky. I wasn’t really sure that it would work, but I trusted her and decided to give it a go. Dentist L checked where I would like to go in my imagination when I relaxed, and we agreed on a seat by a country stream.

We did the relaxation, and it was wonderful. No one was more surprised than I. She got me to let go of my muscles, gradually sending all my stress flowing out through my feet. She encouraged me to release the handkerchief. That took a little doing, as it had always kept me safe in the past. Then I was sitting by the stream, watching the water flow by and feeling warm in the sunshine, with lambs in the field across the way. Dentist L told me how good I was at it. That felt wonderful too: I could do something well at the dentist, instead of being told that I was difficult to treat. I didn’t need to be told that—didn’t they think I understood that?

I said to her, “You are such a nice lady, and I trust you completely. I am going to tell you something I have never told anyone else.” I then went on to tell her about how my father used to beat me regularly with his belt and how I had a belt phobia. I told her that my coworkers in the clothing shop where I work had to ensure that I never put out the stock belts or serve a customer who is buying a

belt. If I came across a belt, I would scream and throw it to the other side of the room. Dentist L said that she felt privileged and humbled to be told such a difficult story and that I was to tell her if anything that she did made me feel uncomfortable or brought up those memories. She also asked my permission to tell her friend and colleague, a clinical psychologist, about me to check if there was anything special that she could do to help me. Of course, I agreed.

We then went into the dental surgery, and Dentist L asked me if I felt that I could sit in the chair so that she could look at my bleeding gums. I sat in the chair, and we did a bit more relaxation; then she asked if she could tip me back just a little bit. When she did that, she checked that I was OK, and she asked if she could go a bit farther, just to be able to see better. I was OK with that; I felt so safe. She also gave me a stop signal. She said that sometimes she was concentrating very hard and might miss the signal, so she asked her dental nurse to look out for it as well. Do you know that in all the visits, Dentist L never missed a stop signal herself? It was so good, though, that there were 2 people looking out for me.

Dentist L had a look with a mirror (nothing else), and it turned out that my bleeding gums were fine; they just needed better cleaning. Healthy gums don't bleed, so even if they were uncomfy and bleeding, I was to carry on and brush them. They would settle in about 3 days. This would mean that my swollen gums would shrink, and she would be able to clean my teeth without contacting them as much and hurting me. Dentist L suggested that I practice my relaxation at home; the more I practiced, the better I would be at it. She also explained that it would be a good idea if I rewarded myself for my fantastic progress and the ability to learn new skills so well. She said that if I were a child, she would give me a sticker. She was quite sure that I wouldn't want that, however, and we had a little joke about it. She suggested that I treat myself to something small, such as a few flowers or a magazine. I did—a bunch of freesias—and every time I looked at them on the mantelpiece, I felt so proud of myself. I positively swelled with pride and said to myself, "Just think about what you managed to do."

At my second visit, I went directly into the surgery. Dentist L encouraged me to leave my hanky untouched in my lap. I was reluctant at first because I still believed that I needed it to be able to cope (and I told her that). She explained again that if my hands were tense, the rest of my body would become tense. She got me to try an experiment where I deliberately made a pair of really tight fists—and do you know? She was right! My body did get tense. We then repeated the experiment with the hanky, and she was right again—my arms and legs and back and stomach all clenched up. She explained that if I believed that the hanky was making me able to accept treatment, I would never believe that it was me, with my new skills, who was capable of having dental treatment. I did my relaxation for myself, and she did an examination with x-rays and explained what needed doing. My cleaning was better, and my gums had stopped bleeding.

At my third visit, I did my relaxation again, and Dentist L started to clean my teeth. She showed me in a mirror. She started at the top of the teeth, nowhere near the gums, so that I could understand the feelings of pressure and scraping and the funny noises. She worked closer and closer to the gum and told me to let her know if it was uncomfortable. When it felt uncomfy in one area, she put paste on it, which made it go numb. This time, I didn't even bring a hanky; I didn't need it. I knew that I would be OK—that I could do what we had agreed on.

On the next visit, we tried out the injection in the mouth that makes you numb. I managed it easily; I felt so safe. The experience was so good because at the end of each visit, we agreed on the task for the next visit. Not only that, Dentist L always checked with me at the beginning of the next visit to

see that I had remembered the deal and that I was still OK with it. Do you know what? I felt more in control.

Indeed, I felt so safe that I told her about my dreams. All my life, I had nightmares about my father. In them, he gradually became a skeleton, and he became stuck like this for many years. Since I had been coming to see Dentist L, I was able to grind him into powder, and he no longer bothered me. Dentist L congratulated me on my skill in dealing with the situation. She suggested that I do the same sort of stepped approach with the belt problem, as we had been doing in the office for my dental phobia.

To cut a long story short, I had all my fillings done without an injection in the arm; I got rid of my belt phobia; and my father never came back in my dreams. On my last visit, Dentist L asked me if I felt confident enough to go to a different dentist or if I would like to stay with her for my next examination and then move on. She also asked if I would prefer to transfer to another lady dentist, or she could ask my son's dentist to see me again. I said that I would go to Dentist N. Dentist L assured me that I had the skills and ability to cope really well. I felt so proud of myself, and I knew that I'd be able to have my treatment.

A few weeks later, I wrote to Dentist L to tell her that I had seen Dentist N. I had a checkup, and he couldn't believe I was the same person. How good is that?